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# LE BELLE ARTE



*Decorative fabrics of Distinction*

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*Renaissance pattern, reminiscent  
of the Gothic pomegranate design*



# LE BELLE ARTE

**I**TALY of the Cinquecento was peeling with life, and exuberant with enthusiasm over the glorious rediscovery of the culture of ancient Greece and Rome. At the same time she was reaching forward with kindled imagination to new discoveries in the field of human endeavor.

**U**NLIKE other European countries, which during the Middle Ages had been preoccupied above all with war, Italy never let her internal strife interfere with her business enterprises. The Crusades, which ruined the rest of Christendom, were to her a source of revenue. Venice, especially, tempered her zeal for the faith with commerce.

**E**VERY occasion served the Venetians for a display of pageantry. Whether attention was focused on the brilliant procession of a Doge in the Piazza of Saint Mark's, or upon a festival in the crowded Rialto, the effect was equally magnificent. Porticos were hung with cloth of gold,

turquoise and scarlet, with trophies and with paintings of the greatest masters. Flags and carpets were hung from every balcony. The whole city broke out in rejoicing.

**G**AY at heart was Venice, while sombre and brooding was Florence. There, every palace was a fortress. In Venice, the interests of the individual were submerged in those of the state; in Florence a few individuals dominated the state. But money, which was always the root of the Medici power, was not their only claim to priority. Besides being international bankers, the Medici family were the greatest patrons of art and learning that the world had ever known.

**L**ORENZO the Magnificent, more completely than any other individual of his day, expresses the aspirations of the Renaissance. It is said that the title of "Magnificent" was bestowed upon him because as a child, having received the gift of a horse from Sicily, he had reciprocated by sending the donor a present of much greater value, defending his action by declaring that nothing was more glorious than to outshine others in

matters of generosity. Lorenzo's admiration for the antique amounted to a passion. He spared no exertion in his attempts to make Florence the intellectual center of the Renaissance movement.

**T**HE citizens of these two great republics were possessed of an instinctive sense of beauty. When Venice gradually recognized that the dis-



*One of the many pomegranate patterns which were typical of the period preceding the Italian Renaissance*



covery of America and of new routes to the Indies had stripped her of her maritime power, she took account of this cult of beauty, this development of taste which the Renaissance had produced, and with a view to business as usual, converted it into a source of gain. She enthusiastically increased her activity in the manufacture of artistic objects, and in keeping with her traditional patriotism, she consecrated this movement to the glory of her republic.

**C**HIEF among the industrial arts which Venice had encouraged was that of weaving. She had early been a center of the silk weaving art, as had the other Italian cities, Lucca, Florence, Siena, Genoa, Milan and Bologna. The sumptuous velvets and damasks from these great centers of industry were world famed. It is not to be wondered at, for the greatest artists of the day were not only painters and sculptors but they were creators in the field of the industrial arts as well.

**T**HE textiles of the Italian period show traces of three distinct elements: the Oriental, which had surged westward following the great Mongol

conquest; the Gothic, which had made its appearance with Christianity; and the growing naturalism which had come in with the art of Giotto.

**D**URING the Gothic period, the distinguishing elements of the Chinese designs were gradually eliminated. Animated animal patterns, which at first had followed closely their Chinese prototypes, became thoroughly Occidental in character. Finally, during the Renaissance, these patterns, which had played such an important part in textile design since the antique period, disappeared altogether, except as they were occasionally introduced into heraldic motifs. The elimination of animal forms was hastened because the intricate details of these patterns were not easily introduced into the weaving of the increasingly popular velvets.

**A**NIMAL patterns were supplanted by a new development of plant form, the silhouette, which was of Oriental origin, being invoked by the Persian palmette, which in turn had been inspired by the Chinese lotus. This motif consisted of



*Florentine silk pattern of the Renaissance. Flower forms, bound by crown and surrounded by ogival framework*



many varieties of large inflorescences, composed of stalks, with leaves, flowers or fruits, all of which are classified as "pomegranate patterns."

**S**IMULTANEOUSLY with the pomegranate patterns existed another type, thoroughly Gothic in character. It consisted of a sort of framework which closely imitated the tracery of architectural openings. Countless variations of this type of ornament existed. The tracery was formed by ropes, ribbons or stems, with or without foliage.

**U**P TO the 16th century, these two types of design were distinct. With the Renaissance, an evolution took place which bound the framework and the inflorescence together. As the period advanced, the more closely were the two combined, until they were confounded in one simple motif. This adaptation of the pomegranate pattern, which so often consisted of flower forms issuing from a vase, crown or basket, was elaborated upon indefinitely through the silk patterns of the late Renaissance and Baroque periods.

O RIENTAL formulas were retained longest by Venice, because of her close connection with the Orient, and the daily influx of Oriental products which came to her markets. She retained the four flowers of Persian and Turkish art, the tulip, the carnation, the eglantine and hyacinth, and a whole group of asters and palmettes, which she isolated, reunited in bouquets, or arranged in rosettes. She favored also a sort of undulating vine ornament which was of Oriental extraction. Her fabrics were masterpieces of the weavers' art. She wove into them her love of color and her joy of life.

W HILE Venice was obtaining gorgeous effects by the use of her rich reds, greens and blues, combined with a lavish use of gold and silver, Florence was embodying in her textiles, a refinement of form, of which only she was capable, and Siena was weaving into hers, her devotion to religion. While each of these centers of the silk weaving industry possessed certain individual characteristics, the textiles as a whole were permeated with a tranquil feeling of balance,



*Italian Renaissance motif, showing vase and flower forms surrounded by framework*

symmetry and dignity which characterized the Renaissance style.

**R**EPRODUCTIONS and adaptations of the art of the Renaissance are always a part of the collection of Stroheim and Romann. Not only have they sponsored the reproduction of many fine museum pieces, but they have created many modern fabrics inspired by these same precepts of form and color.



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